

Cost of living, affordable housing top issues; New survey suggests incumbent mayor on track to win re-election, but with smaller vote share

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Byline: David Rider Toronto Star Chief

Body

Torontonians are thinking about the painful cost-of-living squeeze and housing affordability crisis as the Oct. 24 civic election looms, a new poll suggests.

The Forum Research survey of 1,017 randomly selected Torontonians, conducted Oct. 7-8, also found that Mayor John Tory appears headed for re-election but could see his share of the total vote slip below that of the 2018 election.

Of respondents to the interactive voice response telephone survey, 24 per cent identified the cost of living and inflation as their top issue in this election, followed by housing affordability at 21 per cent.

Next came traffic congestion and transit (13 per cent), city infrastructure, services and taxes (12 per cent), and crime and gun violence (11 per cent).

Rounding out the list with five per cent or less were: municipal action on climate; anti-racism and other inclusion efforts; pedestrian and cyclist safety; and COVID-19 pandemic recovery.

The poll conducted for the Star is considered accurate to within three percentage points 19 times out of 20.

Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff said the poll shows Torontonians are most worried about the issues over which city council has the least control. "The cost of living is primarily a federal issue and the affordable housing problem has been around forever, with very little apparent progress," from the federal and provincial governments which have the most levers to reduce costs, he said.

Myer Siemiatycki, a politics professor emeritus at Toronto Metropolitan University, said the poll reveals "a bit of a disconnect between people's concerns and what it is that municipalities actually have the capacity to deliver or fulfil."

"It reflects the general preoccupation Torontonians and Canadians have with escalating costs," he said. Inflation soared amid pandemic supply chain disruptions and the economic impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Candidates for Toronto's mayor and 25 council seats could take voters' pocketbook concerns into account while making promises about property taxes, Siemiatycki said, even if council has little power over other household costs.

Council's housing tools including offering city land to developers in exchange for a percentage of the units being affordable. Some candidates are vowing to relax rules that prevent, in many parts of the city, increased housing density in neighbourhoods dominated by single-family homes.

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Cost concerns "speak to the real anxiety and stress that people are feeling and are projecting onto a municipal government" that has limited tools and financial resources to address them, Siemiatycki said.

When poll respondents were asked which mayoral candidate will get their vote, Tory got 56 per cent support followed by Gil Penalosa at 20 per cent and two others, Chloe-Marie Brown and Blake Acton, tied at six per cent.

In 2014, Tory won 40 per cent of the vote beating challengers including Doug Ford, now Ontario's premier, and former NDP MP Olivia Chow. In 2018 Tory grabbed just over 62 per cent of the vote, beating challengers including former city chief planner Jennifer Keesmaat.

While Tory's support appeared softer heading into the home stretch, Siemiatycki said "at this point it looks like an unbridgeable gap" unless many of the other candidates throw their support behind Penalosa, an urbanist and climate activist.

Bozinoff said 20 per cent support is a "feather in Penalosa's cap" considering he was largely unknown until recently, but there's no guarantee respondents who chose him will actually vote, especially if it appears likely that Tory will win.

"I think people are getting a little bit tired of John Tory," as he seeks a third term that he says will be his last, Bozinoff said. "I think he's way overexposed."

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